

LITERARY SECTION

EXCERPT: THE LAST DAYS

Katrina Tuvera
De La Salle University
Manila, Philippines
kimi.tuvera@gmail.com

About the contributor

Katrina Tuvera is the author of two books, *Testament* (2002), a collection of short stories, and *The Jupiter Effect* (2006), a novel, both winners of the National Book Award for Fiction. She is a Fall 2011 recipient of a Bogliasco Foundation fellowship at the Liguria Study Center for the Arts and Humanities in Genoa, Italy where she will work on her second novel.

Author's note

The following is an excerpt from a work-in-progress tentatively called *The Last Days*, set in two historical eras—the Japanese occupation, and the martial-law years—exploring the nature of collaboration and complicity during times of repression.

Noontime in early January of 1986, a bomb concealed in a black knapsack exploded in the first car of the Light Rail Transit approaching the EDSA station, killing twelve people and spiking Taft Avenue below with bolts of glass and metal. It was a bomb made of parts assembled from all over the country: the knapsack bought in a smuggled goods store in Davao, a timer once a stopwatch that belonged to a track-and-field coach in Batangas. The cord detonating the explosive, a mix of fuel oil and fertilizer, had come from a discarded turntable in a neighborhood in Taguig. The blasting cap was among many used in a Visayan village known for dynamite fishing.

There were many things the next morning that would not find their way to the front pages. Among them was, of the twelve people who died, a young mother who woke up at sunrise, wrenched from sleep by someone wheezing at the foot of her bed. In the early hours of that Saturday she had been dreaming and in that dream she walked through a house she'd never seen in waking life, a small, clean cottage she thought perfect in all ways except for an earsplitting drilling in the backyard. The walls smelled of fresh paint, blindingly white. At the end of a long hall a tall

mirror showed the reflection of a girl in a plaited skirt. And that was strange, because even as the young mother dreamed she thought to herself not once in her childhood had she owned such an outfit. A row of bottles, of different shades of blue, stood on a windowsill shaking ever so slightly at the stridency exploding from outside. When the young mother woke up, the noise, it turned out, was coming from her six-month old son, Boomboom, ill since Thursday. Sometime after midnight Boomboom had taken a turn for the worse, and now he struggled, with a cough too loud and deep to be coming from such a tiny chest.

The next day's papers also would not mention a man – the train operator – who the very second before the explosion had finally decided he no longer gave a crap about his sister marrying her most dubious suitor, a loan shark three times her senior. The usurer, the train operator thought, might truly be fond of her anyway, and if he was somewhat stingy with food – well, let that be his sister's problem. She'd always had a poor appetite, even as a toddler. And she needn't worry about feeding her own children since her betrothed had absolutely made clear he was not interested in offspring.

The morning after the blast, newspapers instead reported how a manhunt had been launched for – the columnists opined – those bent on destroying the country's institutions, who belittled the nation's progress of the last two decades. No mention of withered infants on their way to dying anyway, bomb or no bomb, nothing said about hardnosed girls not marrying for love and, just as foolish, not even for money.

The young woman with the sick son had never been on the LRT, only the year before inaugurated by the President, but neighbors told her it was the fastest way to the public hospital, so with baby sleeping and bundled in a blanket she had made her way up the Baclaran platform where other commuters already gathered. There was a group of girls in school uniform – they would ride the last car, away from the bomb, and would not die. There was a man bending his head to light a cigarette. He would take the window seat next to the young mother and be killed by a pole rammed into his chest. Had they both suspected their common fate, the man may have thought twice before blowing smoke so close to a wheezing child. And the mother may not have grunted, wrinkling her nose in disgust. They might even have exchanged the politest of smiles.

But they had no idea, and that train rumbled along. Inside, the young mother watched, fascinated, the rooftops outside sweeping by, waves of corrugated iron. Through window after window, she caught glimpses of other lives: an ironing board, an old woman tying her hair, cats sniffing an upturned pot. Then Boomboom woke up, coughing again. The mother cradled him tighter, brushed her nose against his neck, her last act in life as the bomb finally blew apart metal, glass, mother, child.

ON THAT Saturday when the bomb exploded, shortly before noon, just as Boomboom's mother bent over her sick son on the train, Julian Contreras sat in a wicker chair reading a telegram, his mind traveling back to a country of yellow fields and hillside houses. He had come a long, long way from a childhood he rarely spoke of, years spent in San Isidro and then Sebastian, towns not much different from each other except that the first grew sugar and the second thrived with rice paddies. But it was Sebastian that Julian had spent forty years trying, most times with success, to forget. That Saturday, however, he was back there, in his mind. Julian scanned the telegram, let his gaze linger on the words: *Dead and buried*.

Beyond his bedroom door were the sounds of family. His son Kiko's stereo, kept at low volume. Footsteps running towards a ringing phone, his daughter Gaby's voice rising. She laughs. I was her age when I left, Julian thinks, and within him is a surge of gratitude. So long ago, simply nothing more to be done now.

In the kitchen Julian's wife, Emi, sat growing impatient by the minute. More than an hour had passed since she sent Luz to the store for a bottle of soy sauce and if the maid didn't return soon there was the very real prospect of bland pork stew for lunch. Emi had no way of knowing how – at the same moment the metal rod on the LRT train pierced the lung of the man who only minutes before had smoked his last cigarette – Luz on impulse decided to take a roundabout way home. She had bought the soy sauce plus a bottle of gin she drank in secret every night in the garden. The store owner, an old man vocal about his admiration for The Widow, knew of Luz's sly habit, and took every opportunity to tease her about it, but that morning he went a little too far, hinting there might be other things Luz was hiding from Julian and his family.

"You don't really think that's a good guy right there, do you?" he sneered about her boss. "A good guy would quit, one ally less for that asshole in the Palace."

Luz was an Ilocana, from the same province as Julian and the President; from the start her faith in these men stemmed from regional pride and kinship. But she was also a woman with a soft heart who took the old man's ribbing as a suggestion she was some kind of a hypocrite. His rudeness stung her, and to calm her nerves she took a detour, walking through the park five blocks away, before going home to face the family for whom she had worked since the birth of Kiko, now twenty-one.

The train and the twelve people inside it were blown to pieces at 11:28. Word of the blast first reached Julian's home an hour later, lunch halfway through. It was Luz who sprang the news on everyone. The storekeeper's words still on her mind, she had tuned in to Radio Veritas when she finished serving the stew and heard the station's man on the scene describing that site of sheer chaos. She ran to the family seated around the table, cutting short their idle talk.

"Twelve dead!" she gasped. Emi blinked her eyes at the maid, at whom she was still feeling a little annoyed.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

But slowly everyone else began to understand. A chair scraped the floor, Kiko jumped to his feet and ran to the TV. Luz's words trailed after him: I bet there's more, don't you?

Emi shot a glance down across the table to her husband. Their life by now had seen too many of these upheavals, and Julian, meeting her gaze, nodded, acknowledging that, yes, now he would have to, even on a weekend, haul himself back to the office. He had not yet told her of the telegram, and he would not yet still, especially now. Julian knew enough of Emi's superstitions: news of one other death would send her frantically deciphering her horoscope for the rest of the month.

Julian dressed slowly in the bedroom. He took the telegram from the top of the bedside table and slipped it into a drawer. He thought again of the words – dead, buried. Julian had long decided he would not mourn his father's passing. Still, at that moment, he wondered: The old man died as he always feared, alone – what did he think of, what did he look like, breathing his last, in that corner room of a house I haven't seen in decades? Outside, the paths from the church and schoolhouse converge. And the trees bend low, their shadows miniature crosses on the ground.

EMI CONTRERAS, after Luz barged in with news of the bomb, remembered how eons ago as a child of eleven she waited for a ride at the corner of Libertad and Harrison with her mother, Maring, tightly gripping a sack filled with cheese and canned goods from an American warehouse. It was the year war broke out, they lived on a Pasay sidestreet that Maring – she of a seaside childhood – detested, a neighborhood crowded not just with people but noise and dirt and the sweet-heavy odor of bananas frying in sidewalk stalls. Whenever it rained the heat from the soil rose with a stench, mixing with smoke from nearby tabaqueros. Maring had grown up in Lanao. Had she suspected, when her husband Jose proposed marriage, that someday she would end up in a miserable corner of a crowded city, she would have done everything in her power to will herself out of love.

Young Emi had been unable to read the warnings of her father's impending disappearance. For weeks, Jose grumbled over supper about "the Nips," talk that upset Maring who responded by retreating to their bedroom, the rice untouched and steaming on her plate. The night before Jose left, Emi pestered him with schoolwork. He was a wizard in math and later Emi would wonder why her old man did not go into business or banking, or the sciences, even, instead of becoming a sergeant in the Philippine Constabulary.

"He was lazy," insisted Maring, who had often asked herself the same thing, finally concluding that the man she married was not only indolent, but spineless to boot. It did not cross Maring's mind how he just might have been, in the end and in fact, running away from her.

But Jose doted on their daughter, and she adored him in ways that could have filled him with some bitterness, since Emi's affection was in stark contrast to Maring's disappointment. He never learned to share Maring's religion. Though from a Muslim countryside, Maring was Catholic. Jose was a non-believer. Long ago, at eighteen, he exiled himself from his hometown of Daraga, escaping to Lanao after beating up the town priest who had impregnated his favorite cousin. The cousin's name was Emilia. Jose had her in mind when he named his only child.

On that last night, Jose squatted on the checkered floor of their porch, in front of the bench where Emi sat, math notebook spread on her lap. The child was learning about fractions. How, she asked, could $1/4$ be smaller than $1/3$ when four was bigger than three?

"What do you think?" Jose said, a ploy he used to give Emi a chance to figure things out on her own – or himself, more time to reply. "Suppose it's your birthday. You've got a cake. You, me, Mama want equal portions. We cut the cake into three. One-over-three – but what if your Ma gets it into her head to feed the entire street?"

"I'll run out of cake."

"Oh, your mother. She'll just run out and buy more! And we'll cut that cake into – what, forty, fifty pieces? One-over-fifty. More slices, but smaller ones. It can go on and on. Infinito. Never-ending." When Jose tucked her into bed that evening, neither knew he would be gone the next day.

The summons to army camp arrived while Emi was in school. Maring, strangely enough, was not alarmed. She thought she knew what Jose would do.

"We'll be safe in Lanao," she said. "They won't look for you there."

Jose looked as if she had spat on his face.

"It's been years," she continued. "No one remembers that long."

My only regret, Jose would tell Emi years later, was not waiting for you. By then Emi was no longer a child and the confession only deepened her grief. Jose stuffed the summons in his pocket. Not looking at Maring, he asked, before leaving her forever:

"Tell me, wife. When did you convince yourself you married a coward?"

Inside their room he collected some clothes, wrote a note to his daughter. By the afternoon when Emi came home, he was gone.

The bombs began falling on American airfields the following week. Already in Manila there was a frantic rush to railroad stations and trains were crammed with old men, women, children retreating southwards. The Americans had begun pulling out but in the port district they threw open their warehouses for the city's remaining civilians to grab food and other supplies. Maring

brought Emi with her. Throngs had already come and gone, still they managed to seize a slab of cheese, some canned goods. The streetcars were still running. Many years later, on the day the LRT exploded, Emi would remember that time and how, at the corner of Libertad and Harrison, she first heard the drone, then saw the Japanese bombs that brought the war, finally, to their neighborhood. Suddenly the air was thick with smoke and reeked of burning metal. People screamed, sirens blared as the child Emi looked horrified at the plane-streaked sky. A man nearby was moaning for help, she could not see where he had fallen. In her mind she was hearing Jose's voice from that last night on the porch. How could he ever find his way back now? Here was when the daughter's need began, lasting through much of her life, that hope of seeing her father once more, like his fractions, infinite.